

OUR EIGHT FAVOURITE USA NATIONAL PARKS

By Robert Edwards

When we think of America's great national parks, only a few may spring to mind – perhaps Arizona's breathtaking Grand Canyon, California's stunning Yosemite, Florida's great Everglades swamplands and Wyoming's Yellowstone, founded in 1872 and the granddaddy of them all. But, in reality, there are 58 of these glorious parks as well as 333 affiliated natural, cultural and recreational sites.

Here are eight of our favourites parks – all open year-round and selected for their variety of locations and attractions:

ALASKA – DENALI

- **Why go?** To view a dramatic landscape of glaciers, tundra and rivers, plus North America's tallest mountain and an impressive array of wildlife. Note – if you go now, you'll be arriving during Alaska's 50th anniversary celebrations as an American state.

- **Overview:** Established in central Alaska in 1917 with more than six million acres of scenic

splendour, this is a paradise for hikers, climbers and wildlife watchers. Keep your eyes open for black and grizzly bears, wolves, caribou, moose and big-horned Dall sheep.

- **Don't miss:** Awe-inspiring Mount McKinley,

at 20,320 feet, North America's highest peak.

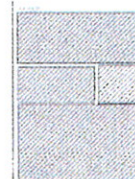
- **Special treats:** In winter, race across the ice on a dogsled, cross-country ski or snowshoe. In other seasons, raft down the Nenana River.

- **Practical information:** In summer, there are up to 21 hours of daylight and May and June are the best times to climb Mount McKinley. Most visitors prefer to tour the park by narrated shuttle bus. For further information, visit www.nps.gov/dena

COLORADO – MESA VERDE

- **Why go?** To view North America's most-remarkable collection of cliff and mesa-top dwellings, built between 550AD and 1,300AD by the indigenous Puebloan people.

- **Overview:** Established in 1906 and covering more than 52,000 acres of arid, south-western Colorado, this unique park provides an insight



into the lifestyle of the mysterious ancestors of about 24 south-western Native American tribes.

- **Don't miss:** Splendid Cliff Palace, which once housed 100 people in its 150 rooms.

- **Special treats:** Take a ranger-led archaeological tour or, in winter, cross-country ski or snowshoe through the park.

- **Practical information:** Although the park is open year-round, most cliff dwellings are not accessible during winter months. Climbing to the cliff dwellings can be strenuous, so wear practical shoes. www.nps.gov/meve

FLORIDA – DRY TORTUGAS

- **Why go?** To snorkel or swim amid some of North America's most beautiful coral reefs.

- **Overview:** Only about 85 acres of this nearly-65,000-acre subtropical park (established in 1992) are on its seven, low-lying islands known as keys; the rest are underwater in a glorious, tropical-fish-filled stretch of the Gulf of Mexico.

- **Don't miss:** Island-sited Fort Jefferson, America's largest (16-acre) remaining coastal fort.

- **Special treats:** Wreck diving or sports fishing.

- **Practical information:** The park can best be reached by a three-hour boat journey or a 40-minute seaplane trip from Key West. Visitation is at its peak in April and May; there may be rough seas in winter. www.nps.gov/dtto

HAWAII – VOLCANOES

- **Why go?** To view two of the world's most-dramatic and active volcanoes – Kilauea, more than 4,000 feet high and growing, and Mauna Loa, towering about 13,677 feet above the Pacific Ocean.

- **Overview:** This unique, World Heritage site and international biosphere reserve was established in 1916 on more than 217,000 acres of 'the Big Island' of Hawai'i (which gave its name to the whole archipelago). Its landscape ranges from lush rain forest to recent lava flows and stark desert.

- **Don't miss:** Watching fresh lava flowing into the Pacific Ocean amid great clouds of steam.

- **Special treat:** View the three-mile-wide, 400ft deep Kilauea Caldera from the rustic Volcano House.

- **Practical information:** To avoid crowds, visit the sites early in the morning or late in the afternoon. Although warm on the coast, the park's high reaches can be cold, wet and even snowy. www.nps.gov/havo

NEW MEXICO – CARLSBAD CAVERNS

- **Why go?** To explore one of the world's deepest and most-spectacular caverns, described by American cowboy comedian Will Rogers as "The Grand Canyon with a roof on it".

- **Overview:** Formed over millions of years, covering nearly 47,000 acres and named a national park in 1930, this network of caverns – some accessible only to trained cavers – lies under the Chihuahuan Desert in south-eastern New Mexico.

- **Don't miss:** The spectacular, six-storey-tall rock formations and Giant Dome in the Big Room's Hall of Giants.

- **Special treat:** Watching the summer evening exodus from the cave's mouth of nearly a half-million Mexican free-tailed bats.

- **Practical information:** The temperature underground remains a constant 56F throughout the year. There's a one-mile, mainly-downhill walk into the main cavern, with lifts down into the Big Room. www.nps.gov/cave

NORTH CAROLINA/TENNESSEE – GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS

- **Why go?** To view some of eastern America's most beautiful mountains and hardwood forests, as well as fascinating traces of the lifestyle of the hearty pioneers who settled the area in the early 19th century.

- **Overview:** Established in 1934 and covering more than 521,000 acres in south-western North Carolina and south-eastern Tennessee, America's most-visited national park encompasses some of the world's most ancient mountains (soaring up to 6,643 feet), dense woodlands – particularly spectacular in the autumn when the foliage turns brilliant scarlet, gold and orange – and scenic portions of the renowned Blue Ridge Parkway and Appalachian Trail.

- **Don't miss:** The rustic, pioneer homes and churches of the early pioneers along the 11-mile, one-way route starting at Cades Cove. Along the way you may see deer, bears and costumed interpreters of pioneer life.

- **Special treat:** A visit to North Carolina's Cherokee Indian reservation on the edge of

the park, particularly in the summer when an outdoor amphitheatre stages *Unto These Hills*, the moving story of the tribe's history.

● **Practical information:** During the peak summer and autumn foliage periods the park is less crowded earlier in the day and midweek. The road to its highest peak (Clingman's Dome) is closed in the winter. www.nps.gov/grsm

UTAH – ZION & BRYCE CANYON

● **Why go?** You have a choice of two spectacular canyon parks only 83 miles apart. Why not visit them both?

● **Overview:** Established in 1919 and covering nearly 147,000 acres, Zion is the older and larger of the two (Bryce, established in 1928, covers around 36,000 acres). Zion was named by 19th-century Mormon pioneers after their celestial city. You can understand why when you gaze up at its majestic, 3,000ft cliffs. Bryce, on the other hand, is known for its fantastic, multi-coloured rock spires or hoodoos, which the Paiute Indians believed were contorted, petrified people.

● **Don't miss:** In Zion – the free shuttlebus trip along the Zion Canyon Scenic Drive, with stops along the way for stunning views, the Emerald Pools, nature walks and birdwatching. In Bryce – the view from Bryce Point of the sunrise over North America's highest plateau.

● **Special treats:** Take a horseback trail ride through Zion and join an evening star-gazing event at Bryce.

● **Practical information:** Zion's main season is March until October. In summer, when temperatures can soar to 105F, rains can produce a wealth of waterfalls but also flash floods in the Narrows area. Bryce's wildflowers are at their peak in spring and early summer, whereas its numerous bird species appear between May and October. www.nps.gov/zion, www.nps.gov/brca

WASHINGTON – OLYMPIC

● **Why go?** To explore an enchanting area of deep rainforest and rugged Pacific Ocean coastline, which has been declared both an international biosphere preserve and a World Heritage site.

● **Overview:** Sited on a peninsula across the

anniversary as an American state.

bay from Seattle, this 922,000-acre preserve was established as a national park in 1938. There are high mountains, deep lakes, swift rivers, huge, moss-draped trees, and rare plants and animals, such as the Olympic marmot and Mazama pocket gopher, which are found nowhere else on earth.

● **Don't miss:** Mount Olympus, soaring to 7,965 feet and the birthplace of seven of the park's 60 major glaciers.

● **Special treats:** Attend a candle-lit storytelling evening hosted by Quileute Indian elders at their beachside reservation near La Push (featured in the recent blockbuster romantic Vampire film *Twilight*) and/or take a tour of the film sites located in and around the park.

● **Practical information:** Come prepared for rain, particularly on the mountains' western slopes, the wettest area outside Alaska in the continental USA (summer is the driest time to go). Some roads into the park are closed in the winter. www.nps.gov/olym

TRAVEL NOTES

ACCOMMODATION: There are campgrounds, hotels, motels and inns in or around all of these parks, with the exception of Dry Tortugas, which offers only limited and primitive campground facilities (the nearest accommodation is in Key West, Florida, 70 nautical miles away). Entry fees: Only Great Smoky is free. Dry Tortugas charges \$5 for those over 17. Elsewhere, entry tickets – valid for seven days – range from \$10 to \$25 per vehicle, regardless of how many people it holds, or from \$5 to \$12 per person (some offer child discounts). In addition, there are sometimes extra charges for visiting special sites within the parks, such as Mesa Verde's Cliff Palace and Carlsbad Caverns' Big Room. To read before you go: National Geographic's excellent and beautifully-illustrated *Guide to the National Parks of the United States* (pp 466, \$25). More information: www.nps.gov



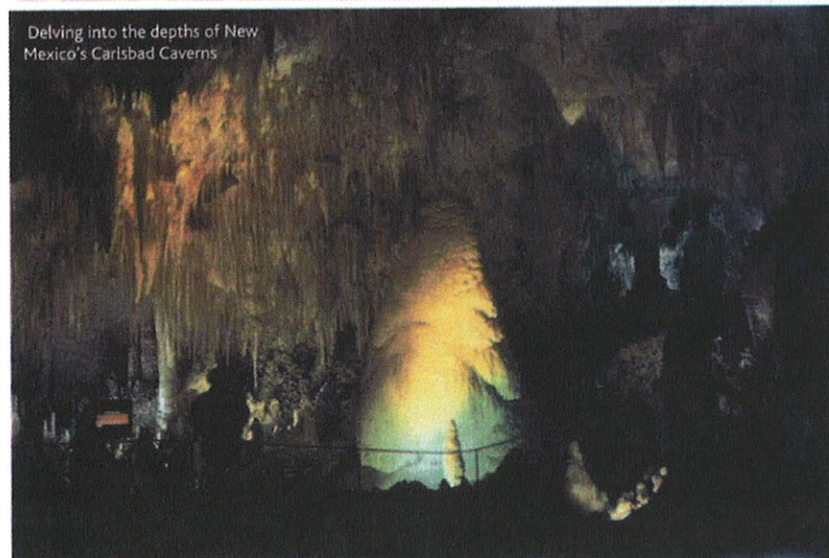
Visit Denali in 2009 and you'll be in Alaska during its 50th

Source: Essentially America {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 1, April 2009
Page: 46,47,48,49
Area: 1563 sq. cm
Circulation: Pub Stmt 50000 Quarterly
BRAD info: page rate £3,894.00, scc rate £0.00
Phone: 01403 276 091
Keyword: Utah

> durrants



Thor's Hammer at sunrise, Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah
Photo: Roy Breslawski - istock

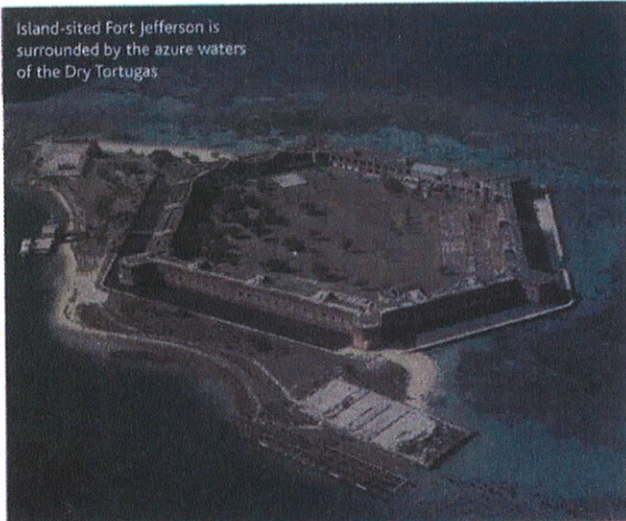


Delving into the depths of New Mexico's Carlsbad Caverns

Source: Essentially America {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 1, April 2009
Page: 46,47,48,49
Area: 1563 sq. cm
Circulation: Pub Stmt 50000 Quarterly
BRAD info: page rate £3,894.00, scc rate £0.00
Phone: 01403 276 091
Keyword: Utah

>durrants

Island-sited Fort Jefferson is surrounded by the azure waters of the Dry Tortugas



An ancient cliff dwelling in Colorado's Mesa Verde



Source: Essentially America {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 1, April 2009
Page: 46,47,48,49
Area: 1563 sq. cm
Circulation: Pub Stmt 50000 Quarterly
BRAD info: page rate £3,894.00, scc rate £0.00
Phone: 01403 276 091
Keyword: Utah

> durrants

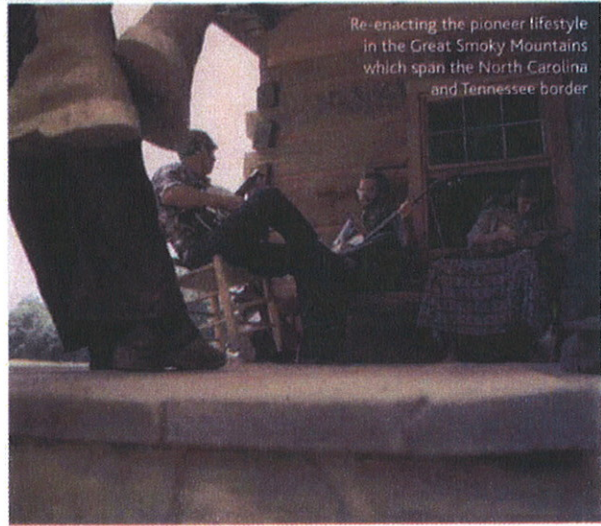
Washington's Olympic is known for its deep, mystical rain forests



An eruption at one of Hawai'i's hyperactive volcanoes



Re-enacting the pioneer lifestyle in the Great Smoky Mountains which span the North Carolina and Tennessee border



Source: Essentially America {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Wednesday 1, April 2009
Page: 46,47,48,49
Area: 1563 sq. cm
Circulation: Pub Stmt 50000 Quarterly
BRAD info: page rate £3,894.00, scc rate £0.00
Phone: 01403 276 091
Keyword: Utah

>durrants

